1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

CHAPTER NINE

RELIGION III: THE PEOPLE OF MAYEL

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I stated earlier that the Lepchas have two or perhaps three religions. My reason for this statement is that the ritual connected with harvesting and hunting, though performed by Mun, have a number of features which do not occur elsewhere. It seems to me possible that the worship of the people of Mayel, and perhaps of Pong *rum* the god of hunters, is of a different origin to the other Mun ceremonies; unfortunately too little is known about the ritual of neighbouring tribes to enable profitable speculation to be made as to whether either or both ceremonies are relatively modern importations from outside, or whether they are on the contrary the oldest Lepcha customs. The most outstanding differences with other Mun ritual, and indeed with ordinary Lepcha life, is, first, a discrimination against women, secondly, an insistance on virginity for some of the celebrants, and thirdly a suggestion of the danger of menstruating women. Women may perform the sacrifice to the people of Mayel, but if they do so the ceremony is curtailed and fewer objects employed; they not only cannot sacrifice to Pong *rum* but must not even be aware when the sacrifice takes place; and the popped corn and *chi* which are employed in it, if not made by a man, which is preferable, must be made by a virgin girl. The chief offerings to the people of Mayel are the *lafét* sacrifice and *sakyou faat*; the small bird for the *lafét* must be killed by a virgin boy, and the strained *chi* poured into the buttered cup by a virgin girl.

This insistance upon virginity is unparalleled in Lepcha life;[1]

[1] The only other instance is in the sacrifice to a pair of demons who cause a coughing disease (? tuberculosis) and whose presence and ritual were divined and by a Nandjému less than ten years ago. For this ceremony the popped corn must be made by a virgin girl, and the Mun must fast for twenty-four hours before the sacrifice. Only two people know how to perform this very modern importation.

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consideration and its neglect would not cause any immediate retribution; but a failure to propitiate the actual spirits might be fraught with all sorts of evil consequences and no one would willingly omit to carry it out.

It is not possible for an ordinary man to have direct dealings with the spirit world, nor indeed would he normally know the cause of his particular trouble. The cause of certain common ills, such for instance as coughs and colds, boils or fever, are, of course, well known to most people, but not the special knowledge required to make the necessary sacrifices to the particular demon which has caused them. For this it is necessary to have recourse to a proper practitioner, either a *Mun* or a *Yukman*, which is the word used by Lepchas to denote a Lama. It seems certain that prior to the introduction of Buddhism into Sikkim such sacerdotal functions as were required by the Lepchas were carried out by Muns. Their services are still much in demand in Lingtem, where they work in close conjunction with the Lamas. In other parts of Sikkim, however, their numbers are steadily decreasing, and the tendency is for all priestly functions to be carried out only by Lamas. In the Kalimpong district (in British India) there are still large colonies of Lepchas, and amongst these people Muns have almost ceased to exist. Such as there are practise almost secretly, for their presence is not welcome to orthodox Lamas.

"A notable feature of Lamaism throughout all its sects," notes Waddell, "and decidedly un-Buddhistic, is that the Lama is a priest rather than a monk. He assigns himself an indispensable place in the religion and has coined the current saying, 'Without a Lama in front there is no (approach to) God.' He performs sacerdotal functions on every possible occasion, and a large proportion of the order is almost entirely engaged in this work. And such services are in much demand, for the people are in hopeless bondage to the demons, and not altogether unwilling slaves to their exacting worship."

The Lamas of Sikkim belong to the *Nin-Ma-pa* or

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unreformed sects. These are the so-called "red hat" Lamas, as opposed to the reformed "yellow-hat" or *Ge-lug-pa*, which form the established Church of Tibet proper. The Nin-ma-pa is more freely tinged than any other with pre-Buddhist practices and its Lamas are required neither to remain celibate nor to practise abstinence. "It regards the metaphysical Buddha Samantabhadra as its primordial deity or Adi-Buddha. Its mystic insight is Mohautpanna or the "great ultimate perfection." Its tutelaries are "The fearful Vajra and Dub-pa-koh-gye." Its guardian demon is "The Lord *Gur*. It worships the Guru Padma-sambhava, the founder of Lamaism, in a variety of forms, both divine and demoniacal, expressive of his different moods at different times, and also his favourite Kashmiri teacher, Sri Sinha, and the Indian teacher of the latter, Gah-rab-Dorje, who derived his inspiration from the celestial Buddha, Vajra-satwa, who in turn was inspired by the primordial deity, Samantabhadra-Buddha."

There are, of course, in Sikkim many learned Lamas who would find no difficulty in expounding the canon of their Church. The Abbot of Lachen, for instance, which is only a long day's march from Lingtem, is a man of quite remarkable intelligence and learning. Among others Mme. David-Neel, the famous French Tibetan scholar and traveller, has paid tribute to his exceptional ability as a teacher, as has my friend Marco Pallis, who also studied with him for a time. But men such as he are rareties in any community; and as for the Lamas in Lingtem I doubt if they could even name the sect to which they belong. But in Lingtem, and in fact all over the Jongu district, the Church is nothing more than a spare-time occupation. There are about eighteen Lamas attached to the Lingtem Monastery and all of these are engaged in the normal occupation of an ordinary Lepcha villager. They attend at the monastery for periodical ceremonies, usually twice each month, but their chief function consists in conducting private services in connection with illness, crops, house-building, and so on, for

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individual members of the community. Unlike Tibet, where animal sacrifice is practically unknown, many of these ceremonies, particularly those in connection with illness and other manifestations of devils, require the sacrifice of an ox or goat, and on such occasions the Lama is assisted by a Mun; for although the Lama has no objection to assisting at such a very un-Buddha-like ceremony he draws the line at actually taking life himself. He is a physician more than a priest, for he deals with the ills of the physical body rather than with those of the soul. Sometimes he is unable himself to diagnose the cause of trouble, and on such occasions he may call in a *Nunjimu*, a person who by dancing herself into a trance is able to ascertain the cause of the trouble, but not to cure it, this being the Lama's own province. The Lama does not, I think, claim for himself any supernatural power. He is merely "one who knows," as the Lepcha word *Yukman* implies, as opposed to the "ignorant one," or ordinary layman. The whole of his teaching is based upon cause and effect; and once a cause has been ascertained its treatment is merely the carrying out of a definite specified ceremony. This conception of course is quite in accordance with the best medical tradition; but it is more open to doubt whether Harley Street would approve of such treatment as, for instance, the sacrifice of a bullock, coupled with a thousand repetitions of the mystic formula "*Om mani padme hum*," as a cure for general debility. If a man calls in one Lama rather than another it is not because he has necessarily more faith in his powers, or thinks he has a better bedside manner, but because he knows more ceremonies: X may have studied only as far as the cure of the common cold; but Y may know how to ensure that your wife's next child is a boy. Either of these treatments would doubtless find favour in Europe; but in the meantime I cannot honestly recommend a pilgrimage to Lingtem for the purpose!

A boy does not usually become a Lama because he feels it is his right vocation but because his horoscope, prepared at birth, decrees it. Every child is born with certain signs, from